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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000085

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MEDIA DIVIDED IN REPORTING ON HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT;
PM DISGRUNTLED

REF: ANKARA 298

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Turkish newspapers and blogs prominently covered the 2008 Human Rights Report (HRR) released on February 25, and as expected were divided in their reporting. The HRR's release during heightened tension between media mogul Aydin Dogan and Prime Minister Erdogan resulted in particular attention being given to freedom of press issues mentioned in the report. Opposition and independent papers (including those owned by Dogan) reported extensively on the HRR's reporting on limitations on press freedoms while pro-GOT newspapers made no mention of the topic, choosing to focus instead on the report's allegations of increased abuses by state security officials. Prime Minister Erdogan expressed his dissatisfaction with the 2008 Human Rights Report in a statement to the media on the way to Van in eastern Turkey for a March 1 campaign rally. He said he would ask Secretary Clinton "what kind of a report this was" during her March 7 visit to Ankara. Dogan also raised the press freedom component of the HRR with the Ambassador. He criticized the HRR's observations on the activities of holding companies, but he praised comments regarding government criticism of the press. Sedat Ergin, editor-in-chief of Dogan Media Group newspaper "Milliyet," told Istanbul CG that the report was extremely well done and praised its overall high quality. End Summary.

12. (U) Turkish newspapers and blogs prominently covered the 2008 Human Rights Report released on February 25 and as expected were divided in their reporting. Dogan media group and other anti-GOT papers have used the 2008 Human Rights Report as a platform to attack the GOT over its \$500 million tax levy on Dogan Holdings (Ref). On February 26 "Hurriyet" reported that the "AKP continued to limit freedom of the press in the country," and focused exclusively on alleged press intimidation reported in the HRR. On February 27 "Milliyet" reported extensively on "Turkey's weak scores" in the U.S. Human Rights Report, listing figures reporting torture, detention without charge, compromised judicial independence, concerns with media freedom and minority religions, as well as violence against women. "Milliyet" also mentioned the positive steps cited by the HRR on Kurdish and Alevi concerns. Pro-government papers "Sabah," "Zaman," and "Yeni Safak" highlighted the HRR's mention of a rise in serious violations of human rights by state security forces. Pro-GOT reporting makes no mention of HRR comments on limitations on press freedoms.

13. (U) Prime Minister Erdogan expressed his dissatisfaction with the 2008 Human Rights Report in a statement to the media on the way to Van in eastern Turkey for a March 1 campaign rally. The PM responded to a question posed by a reporter

from the independent newspaper "Taraf" about his thoughts on the HRR, specifically the section on press freedom. The PM said these parts were included in the report "as a result of an international campaign by Dogan group" and he said he would ask Secretary Clinton "what kind of a report this was" during her March 7 visit to Ankara. He also asked how the United States could "take sides in an issue that involves tax evasion" adding that e "never called for a boycott of a certain mediagroup," but only did so for "the papers that wroe lies about my party, family, and children." (Note The Dogan tax case did not fall within the repoting period and was not mentioned in the HRR. Ed note.)

¶4. (C) Dogan Media Group founder AydinDogan commented on the HRR during a February 27 eeting with the Ambassador, saying that while many previous governments cursed him, none had accused him of "using media as a tool to build pressure against government policies." Dogan personalized his broad-sweeping statement about holding compaies in general that had been included in the Human Rights Report over the past few years. He also oted that his journalists were not subjected to ressure by his company over what they wrote or ddn't write about the government. He pointed out tat the 2008 Human Rights Report said that "one journalist reported that his senior management discouraged the company's journalists from writing aricles critical of the AKP or its members." (Note: The journalist cited was not an employee of the Dogan Media Group. End note.) Dogan did agree with the HRR's reporting on the statements made by senior government officials, including the PM, strongly criticizing the press and media business figures, particularly following the

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publication of reports on alleged corruption connected to the AKP.

¶5. (C) In a separate conversation with Istanbul Consul General on March 1, Sedat Ergin, widely-respected editor-in-chief of "Milliyet" -- one of Dogan Media Group's leading newspapers -- enthusiastically praised the overall excellent quality and balance of the report. He explained that "Milliyet" provided extensive coverage of the report and commented that the recent European Commission's 2008 Progress Report could not compare in quality to the HRR. He found the HRR's specific identification of the PM as a violator of press freedoms admirable and commended the detailed coverage of topics such as violence against women. Ergin specified that journalists at Dogan Media Group did not face pressure to avoid writing critically of the government as the HRR reported allegedly occurred at some media holding companies.

¶6. (C) Comment: The media response to the Human Rights Report predictably fell along pro-GOT and opposition lines. Dogan Media Group papers included mention of the HRR in articles on the Dogan tax levy dispute. In fact, the report made no specific mention of the Dogan Media dispute, which fell outside of the HRR reporting period. While the press freedoms section of the HRR includes only two new paragraphs, several other critical statements were removed from this year's report. Because the report's release coincided with a flare-up in the dispute between the GOT and Dogan Media Group, the press freedom section is receiving more attention than in years past. Political rallies also offer many opportunities for the issue to be addressed in the run up to the upcoming local elections. End Comment.
Wiener